

## The Mystery of Suffering

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Pope John Paul II has recently released an Apostolic Letter entitled The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering. ( 2/11/84) This document seeks to uncover the profound dynamics of physical and moral suffering in the world.

During this season of Lent which falls at the end of the Holy Year of Redemption it is good to reflect on the Christian response to the individual and collective experience of suffering.

The Holy Father interprets suffering as a meeting point between God and humanity. He says in the Apostolic Letter: "Man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery." (4)

A person always seems to experience suffering as an encounter with evil. John Paul concludes: " Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always in some way refers to a good." (7)

When someone is suffering the challenge to reach this good often is very difficult. The suffering person , because of the gift of consciousness, is driven to ask the fundamental question: "Why do I have to suffer?" This question is often addressed directly to God.

### Why Must I Suffer?

By a careful study of the Bible Pope John Paul II uncovers four different responses to the human question: "Why must I suffer?"

(1) The first response is give by Job's three friends. They follow the tradition established in Genesis and suggest that suffering is God's punishment for sin. "From this point of view, suffering appears as a 'justified evil.'" (10) A person feels that he is suffering because he has done something wrong.

(2) Job, however, had done nothing wrong. He came to understand his suffering as a test of his faith in God. The Holy Father continues: "His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent; it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence." (11)

(3) Pope John Paul describes a third meaning when "Suffering must serve for conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject, who can recognize the divine mercy in this call to repentance." (12) For example, it is not uncommon for someone to decide after a serious accident or sudden illness to change his or her goals in life.

(4) However, the most important Biblical revelation of the meaning of suffering is found in the life of Christ itself. Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ." (13)

The four kinds of answers that God has given in the Bible to the human question: "Why must I suffer?" can be summarized as punishment, test, conversion, and love.

#### Why did Christ Suffer?

Christ knew that his mission in the world would involve an almost overwhelming dimension of suffering. He may times told his disciples that he had to suffer and die; and he rebuked Peter when it was suggested that this should not be so.

At the same time Jesus also experienced a natural revulsion to this mission. John Paul says: "Suffering is the undergoing of evil before which man shudders. He says: 'Let it pass from me,' just as Christ says in Gethsemane." (18)

Jesus gave Himself as a free gift to us when he accepted the bitter cup of suffering. "Human suffering has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: It has been linked to love...to that love which creates good." (18)

Christ gave as the meaning to his suffering his love for us. Through his passion and death we have been given the gift of eternal life.

#### How do I do good by suffering?

Pope John Paul states simply that because Christ suffered for us, we can suffer for Christ. "The redeemer suffered in place of man and for man...Thus each man in his suffering can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ." (19)

When a person really experiences this personal sharing in the redemptive suffering of Christ, he begins to experience the grace of joy which comes from within: "A source of joy is found in the overcoming of the sense of the uselessness of suffering, a feeling that is sometimes very strongly rooted in human suffering." (27)

When a person has not found this meaning of love for Christ in the heart of suffering he feels almost overwhelmed by the sense of being a burdan to others." The person feels condemned to receive help and assistance from others and at the same time seems useless to himself." (27)

"The discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ transforms this depressing feeling. Faith in sharing in the sufferings of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person 'completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions'; the certainty that in the spiritual dimension of the work of redemption he is serving, like Christ, the salvation of his brothers and sisters." (27)

The Holy Father concludes ~~that~~ the person is doing considerable good for the redemption of the world by transforming his suffering into a gift of love for Christ. "Therefore he is carrying out an irreplaceable service." (27)

The suffering which Christ took upon himself in obedience for the Father out of His love for us becomes the medium through which we can be released into a new dimension of love through the gift of our own suffering to Christ.

#### How can I do good to those who suffer?

It is important to realize that Jesus is not simply asking for a passive response to suffering. "Christ's revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering." (30)

Pope John Paul II is adamant that Christians must do all that is possible to relieve the causes of suffering in the world. Referring to the particular attraction that Jesus had for people who suffered during his active ministry the Holy Father states: "He went about doing good, and his actions concerned primarily those who were suffering and seeking help." (16)

The Apostolic Letter calls Christians to confront human suffering with the highest professional excellence and the most ardent zeal. Referring to the example of the Good Samaritan, John Paul exhorts us to be available, effective, engaging our whole heart, and not sparing any means. (28)

Singling out the work of physicians, nurses, and social workers as being particularly imbued with the spirit of the Good Samaritan, John Paul also states: "No institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love, or human initiative, when it is the question of dealing with the sufferings of another." (29)

The Holy Father recalls the striking warning which Christ gave to his disciples about the last judgment when each person will be asked what he has done. "As you did it to one of the least of these my bretheren, you did it to me." ( MT: 25: 34-6)

The Apostolic Letter is concluded by a reminder that Jesus served as a light to the world by revealing two complementary ways to respond to suffering in the world: "At one and the same time Christ has taught man to do good by his suffering and to do good to those who suffer. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering." (30)